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Sport in Australia: **Experiences of Women from** **Non-English Speaking Backgrounds**

Australia is often described as a multicultural country and also views itself as a sporting nation. The country's fixation with sport is well documented and while Australian sport has mainly been a white, Anglo-Celtic domain, many minority ethnic groups have used it as a means of acculturating to mainstream society, and as a means of cultural and religious expression. However, research on sport and ethnicity within the Australian context has been limited and the few studies that have been undertaken to date have concentrated on male involvement in sports. The present research addresses this void by exploring issues associated with sport involvement of females from seven selected language backgrounds other than English. For the purposes of this study sport is viewed in its broadest context, encompassing recreational as well as competitive, structured physical activity as defined in the Council of Europe Sport for All Charter. This broadening of the scope of traditional definitions of sport embodies feminist concerns about patriarchal hegemonic practices and issues of Anglocentricity.

Women from non-English speaking backgrounds are disadvantaged in all aspects of sport involvement, from sport spectatorship to playing sport. This group participates in sport at approximately half the rate of females born in Australia, comprises a low proportion (47%) of sport spectators and includes only 0.8% of sport coaches/referees/administrators. Issues of power, otherness, and development and maintenance of dominant ideologies are critical in exploring the underlying explanations for these low levels of involvement in one of Australia's major cultural institutions. The study is based on interviews about attitudes to, and experiences of, sport with twenty-one females from non-English speaking backgrounds; fourteen focus group interviews with women from seven selected language groups; surveys of 1200 females from non-English speaking backgrounds concerning their level and patterns of sport participation; and questionnaires on consumer profiles and policy and program initiatives for females of non-English

speaking backgrounds completed by over 200 service providers. The primary aim of the study is to develop culturally sensitive strategies to increase opportunities for and decrease constraints to sport for this group.

The place sport plays in the lives of the women involved in this study is complex. Respondents faced many gendered-based constraints to their sporting involvement, such as limited time due to domestic duties and childcare. Other restrictions to participation were more culture-specific, such as the lack of opportunity in their home country to develop skills in sport, feeling uncomfortable attending programs due to lack of proficiency in English, and the inability of sport providers to meet religious privacy requirements. Many of the women interviewed simply stated that they were not interested in participating in sport and did not consider it a priority in their life. Any research on sport participation must recognise that not everyone wants to play or be involved in sport. The study shows that this issue must be explored further, especially in regard to policy formulation. A majority of the respondents (76%) from New South Wales local government authorities and state sporting associations attributed the low levels of sport participation of females from non-English speaking backgrounds in their programs to “oppression by ethno-cultural constraints”, but only 5% considered addressing the lack of participation by developing access and equity initiatives. Service providers typically responded “we don’t stop these women from coming here. they can join in just like everyone else in the community.” These responses and comments reinforce notions of cultural deficit and transfer the blame for non-participation to females from non-English speaking backgrounds to the group itself, thus diverting attention from the institutionalised racism which is often inherent in sports policy and delivery. In such instances cultural practices are stereotypically associated with female oppression and used as an excuse for sports with low levels of female participants. If sport providers are to increase opportunity, access and equity they must become more aware of this group’s needs and requirements. However, merely aiming for greater levels of participation of females from ethnic minorities will not address the broader social dynamics associated with Australian sporting culture, the issue of relationships of power and male hegemony. The transformation of sport and the masculine. Anglocentric ideology it perpetuates must be the eventual goal.